

THE MEANING OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IN PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY

by

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PREFACE

IN THIS STUDY I propose to investigate the meaning with which primitive Christianity invested the cultic act of the sacred meal, as it was practised in the communities of the first century. It goes without saying that this investigation will also lead us to examine the question of Jesus' last meal with His disciples. But in order to set aside preconceived ideas and to prevent misunderstanding, I am concerned to emphasize from the outset that this question will only be considered as incidental to the main aim of this study.

As Lietzmann has shown,¹ the ancient Liturgies of the Mass can be traced back to two main "primitive types": the liturgy of St. Hippolytus and the ancient Egyptian liturgy of which the model may be found in Serapion. The two types of liturgy are entirely different from each other. That of St. Hippolytus is dominated by the idea of *the death of Christ* and is above all inspired by the Words of Institution as they are found in St. Paul and in the Synoptists. In complete contrast, the ancient Egyptian liturgy, which goes back to the Didache and so to the most ancient Christian liturgy we possess, does not contain, in its earliest form, either the Words of Institution or the reference to the death of Christ connected with them. The prayers of this second group refer to *the return of the Lord* and to *the fellowship* of those assembled for the meal.

¹ H. Lietzmann, *Messe und Herrenmahl. Eine Studie zur Geschichte der Liturgie*, 1926. (Publication of successive fascicules of an English translation began in 1953 under the title *Mass and Lord's Supper*. Lietzmann's work has not received the attention it deserves from English-speaking scholars; cp. however A. J. B. Higgins, *The Lord's Supper in the New Testament*, 1952, pp. 56-63.—Ed.)

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Lietzmann's work is devoted, almost entirely, to the establishment of this thesis, and he seeks to give a history of the Christian liturgy of the Mass by going back from the more recent to the more ancient liturgies. The result of his research is most important, for the scanty direct indications that we have in the earliest Christian writings, and in the New Testament especially, concerning the ideas of the first Christians about the Lord's Supper reveal this same duality: on the one hand there is the idea of a meal celebrated in the happy and joyful expectation of the return of Christ, without any reference whatsoever to His death; and on the other there is the Lord's Supper, in the form commended by St. Paul, which was destined in the course of time to prevail, i.e. a meal concerned above all to proclaim the Lord's death in remembrance of the Last Supper and of the words that Jesus uttered on that occasion.

These two conceptions of the Eucharist have been noted for a long time.¹ Lietzmann's merit has been to demonstrate by his researches how great must have been the distinction between them, since these two were able for a considerable period to preserve their original characters in the later liturgies.² Lietzmann was too conscious of the gulf separating these two conceptions of the eucharistic meal in primitive Christianity to fall into the error of those who have sought to explain this diversity by tracing the two types of liturgy back to a common ancestor. In contrast with the majority of critics, whose point of departure³ is the *a priori* belief that each of these different conceptions of the Lord's Supper is to be referred to *Jesus' last meal with His disciples*, Lietzmann ascribes to the joyful meal of the Egyptian liturgy an entirely different origin from that of the Pauline Lord's Supper which alone is to be connected with Jesus' last meal. According to him, the meal celebrated

¹ See especially the study by F. Spitta: *Die urchristlichen Traditionen über Ursprung und Sinn des Abendmahls* (*Zur Geschichte und Literatur des Urchristentums*, I, 1893), and J. Weiss, *The History of Primitive Christianity*, E.T., I, 1937, pp. 56 ff.

² In reaction against Lietzmann's position, the most recent attempt to diminish the difference between these two conceptions is that of E. Schweitzer, "Abendmahl", R.G.G., 3rd ed.

³ I limit my references to A. Schweitzer, *Das Abendmahlsproblem auf Grund der wissenschaftlichen Forschung des 19. Jahrhunderts und der historischen Berichte*, 1901, and the article "Abendmahl" by K. L. Schmidt in the 2nd ed. of R.G.G. It is true that Schweitzer, in opposition to the majority of critics, has the merit of having emphasized, with Spitta, that the Last Supper as well as the Lord's Supper of the early Christians has an eschatological character (see also *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, E.T., 1931); but in my view he is mistaken in connecting the two for this reason alone; see below, p. 14.

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with joy by the primitive community is to be derived from another source.¹ Similarly he avoids the further error of those critics who emphasize this joyful meal in order to draw from it conclusions detrimental to the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper. Their conclusions, which are most often nothing more than summary verdicts that it is not authentic, are not in the least justified since the relation between the two things is by no means proven.

So far I am in full agreement with Lietzmann; but in the final pages of his work he raises a question, which ought indeed to be asked: "If the Eucharist celebrated by the Christian community before St. Paul had nothing to do with the Last Supper, what was its origin?" To this question, which is rather outside the scope of his study, Lietzmann summarily replies by the bald assertion that there is no text which can provide any clue. In his view, the "breaking of bread", celebrated joyfully by the first Christians, was no more than the continuation of the daily meals which the Jesus of history shared with His disciples throughout the course of His ministry.² Hence, in the communities after St. Paul, the brotherly love-feasts were inspired by the memory of the daily fellowship in which Jesus had taken His meals with His disciples.

Without wishing to deny that the first disciples did in some sense recall these meals when they "broke bread" after the death of their Master, it seems to me that there are grounds for seeking a more precise solution and one too which is based upon the Biblical text. Lietzmann's hypothetical explanation does not, in my view, sufficiently demonstrate how the apostle Paul could have had the audacious idea of establishing a relation between, on the one hand, this joyful feast of the first Christians and, on the other, the Last Supper with its close association with Jesus' death.

The solution which I shall put forward will seek to make evident that very concrete recollection which is to be found at the origin of the meal in the primitive Church before St. Paul and the ideas which were attached to it under the influence of this recollection; it will also seek to show the connecting link between that and the apostle's conception, which at first sight seems so different.

¹ J. Weiss (*op. cit.*, p. 58) also recognizes this possibility.

² This is an hypothesis also admitted by Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 57.